

# A TIMELINE OF SUCCESS HUNTERS' DISENCHANTMENT IN ANN PETRY'S *THE STREET* AND JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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## **Abstract**

*This article deals with the issue of success ideology in American society. Resorting to psychoanalysis, it paints Petry's and Steinbeck's success hunters' subscription to the ideal of the American myth of success. Their subscription to this social construct leads them to firmly believe in their chances to succeed in American society. However, in their quest for success, the reality of events turns their large optimism into disenchantment. Given that they confront societal evils such as sexism, racism and crooked capitalist practices that ultimately turn their great hope to succeed into disillusion.*

**key-words:** *success-believe- optimism -success hunters- disenchantment*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article aborde la problématique de l'idéologie de la réussite dans la société américaine. En s'appuyant sur la psychocritique, il dépeint l'adhésion à l'idéal du mythe du succès américain des personnages en quête de la réussite de Petry et de Steinbeck. Leur adhésion à cette fabrique sociale les conduit à croire profondément en leurs chances de réussir dans la société américaine. Cependant, dans leur quête de la réussite sociale, la réalité des événements transforme leur grand optimisme en désillusion. Étant donné que ces personnages sont confrontés à des obstacles sociétaux tels que le sexisme, le racisme ainsi que les pratiques capitalistes véreuses qui en définitive, transforment leur grand espoir en désenchantement.*

**Mots-clés :** *réussite- croire- optimisme- chasseurs de la réussite- désenchantement*

## Introduction

Success on the American scene bears a special meaning. In *The American Idea of Success* penned by the American writer Richard M. Hubber (1971, p. 1), success is defined in America as getting money and/or becoming famous. Leaning on this American vision of success, Ann Petry in *The Street* and John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, two American writers portray characters seeking success in American society. Those success hunters largely believe in their chances to succeed and perform tremendous efforts in striving to reach success.

However, their efforts end fruitless as they cannot achieve any social uplift due to some societal givens. Specifically, in *The Street*, Petry pictures Lutie Johnson, a black single woman striving to succeed in order to provide for her and her 8-year-old boy comfortable living conditions.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the quest for success is collective. Steinbeck sketches forth the Joads family having being expelled from their lands in Oklahoma in the share-cropping farming system they were, heading to California, a land said to be full of opportunities with their intent to create better living conditions for the whole family.

In this article, the issue at stake is to show how success hunters' full optimism about their chances to succeed in America turns into disenchantment. The article investigates and portrays the social givens which turn success hunters' over-optimism into a total disenchantment. In particular, the article aims at showing that some societal data such as sexism, racism and unlawful capitalist practices are uncongenial to success hunters' social uplift.

To reach the above aim, I will lean on psychoanalysis. A literary tool that investigates the emotional states of characters. Especially, I will lean on Carl Jung's concept of 'individuation'. Jung (J. Daniels, 2014, p. 2) defines individuation as the "awareness of a deep individuality". This psychological concept will help me show how deep is the belief of success hunters about their chances to succeed in American society.

In its first articulation, the article unwraps the rationales accounting for success hunters' solid credo in their chances to succeed. Then, it focuses on how success hunters' large optimism turns into disillusion due to some societal evils.

### **1. Success hunters' deep belief in their chances to succeed in american society**

Petry and Steinbeck have portrayed in their individual narratives characters who firmly believed in their chances to succeed in their society. Their solid credo rests upon a key fact: their belief in the American myth of success. But before, expounding on their credo in this social construct, let us throw a glance at the success hunters' visions of success. It is true that all the success hunters greedily want to be successful. However, nearly all of them have a peculiar vision of success.

In *The Street*, success to the main protagonist Lutie Johnson, means before everything, leaving her 116th Street and on a cosmic level Harlem; and providing for her and her son Bub, a good living accommodation. Given that she deems that the place where she lives is not suitable to her and to her son. Petry writes: "yes, she [Lutie] thought, she and Bub had to get out of 116th Street. It was a bad street. And she thought about the other streets. It wasn't just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can. (205-206)

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the quest for success is collective. Despite this fact, nearly all the family members have their own idea of success. That is, what each would do if they reach the Promised Land. But Pa and Rose of Sharon are the family members who openly voice out to the reader their visions of success.

Pa, the family head, has a common and simple idea of success. In California, he hopes for him and the family, work and a piece of land to grow: “We’ll get out west an’ we’ll get work an’ we’ll get a piece a growin’ land with water.” (188)

Though modest it may appear to the reader, Pa’s idea of success is an echo of the middle-class men’s success idea. It is one of the average American citizens during an era when the country has to cope with agrarian issues.

Counterpointing Pa’s vision of success, is that of the Joads’ eldest daughter, Rose of Sharon. Being pregnant, Rose designs, schemes and secures another approach of success for her and her husband Connie. Unlike the other family members who wish the family not to split in no circumstances, she thinks once in California, she would depart from the family by leaving the country for the town. There, Connie, her husband, would take a job in a store or factory and later on, would open his own store. Additionally, they would have a little car. Thus, Rose of Sharon sees success in terms of comfort and luxury.

When going through the two narratives, a point that can hit the reader is that Petry’s and Steinbeck’s success hunters are American Dreamers that is they believe in the American Dream, an American world-widely known social construct. Their faith in their chances to achieve success in American society is heavily cemented by their credo in the American myth of success. This social construct refers to the belief that nearly all men can succeed on their own exclusively by their own efforts in America.

The reader comes across the inception of Lutie's embracing of the American myth of success in chapter two. In fact, after visiting the Pizzinis, a white wealthy family, Lutie philosophizes that success is the natural outcome of hard work. She considers the Pizzinis to showcase it. The narrator writes: "after a year of listening to their talk [Pizzinis], she [Lutie] absorbed some of the same spirit (the belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully). Apparently, that's what the Pizzinis had done" (43). Lutie thinks that the Pizzinis' success is also possible for her husband Jim and her. That is why, she thinks "she and Jim could do the same thing. (43)

Here, I infer that Lutie strongly believes in her chances to get success in American society. That is why, she thinks that for the time being if they have not yet succeeded, it is because "they hadn't tried had enough, worked long enough, saved enough. (43)

Another tangible manifestation of Lutie's credo in the American myth of success is the strong individualism she shows off in the narrative. In fact, Petry's female main protagonist reveals herself to the reader as a strong individualistic character who believes that she can reach success on her own without any external help. In the narrative, she actually has no friend and does not wish to befriend with someone. She heavily relies on her own determination to provide a better living condition to her and to her son Bub.

The individualism that Lutie displays is really American individualism as promoted by former United States Head of State, President Herbert Hoover. Broadly speaking, American individualism posits that nearly all individuals can succeed on their own and that government assistance should be minimal. In other words, the American citizen should rely on himself to climb up the social ladder. The reader can notice how much

Lutie has espoused this philosophy. He may even be struck by the overwhelming individualism the young woman shows off. But before his being struck, two thinkers' minds were earlier hit by this American individualism: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Though both are French, those two scholars' minds were hit by American individualism so as to focus some of their writings upon the matter. Crèvecoeur explains how he was struck by Americans' display of a far greater amount of personal initiative and self-reliance. Compared to Europeans, he contends that Americans truly believe they are able to rise from rags to riches and become free because of the socio-political and geographical environment in which they live. J. Crèvecoeur (R. N. Bellah et al, 1986, p. 35) says the American strongly believes "the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour."

His compatriot Alexis de Tocqueville tackles the subject too. In his *Democracy in America*, he calls his readers not to confuse American individualism with egotism. That is why, he took pain to discriminate these two notions. In Book 2, Chapter II of *Democracy in America*, entitled "Of Individualism in Democratic Countries", A. Tocqueville (1875, p. 902) defines American individualism as:

a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. A. Tocqueville, 1875, p. 903

As for egotism, A. Tocqueville (1875, p. 902) sees it as merely "a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer

himself to everything in the world”. From this contrast, he calls for a clear distinction between this individualism and mere egotism. He does not want people to associate American individualism with egotism as he contends that this individualism bears something positive. That is why, he (1875, pp. 902-903) hammers “Egotism is a vice as old as the world” and “individualism is of democratic origin.”

Heavily relying upon her own forces that are courage and over-determination, Lutie believes in her ability to reach her end on her own. Here, a psychoanalytical reading of the narrative allows me to match her individualism with psychologist Carl Jung’s concept of ‘individuation’. According to Jung (J. Daniels, 2014, p. 2), individuation is “the awareness of a deep individuality”. He (J. Daniels, 2014, p. 2) views in individuation “one of the tasks of maturity”. The corollary of such a psychological concept is the solid belief in self-making. That is really the case of Lutie who having a sense of her own individuality, strongly thinks she could succeed on her own.

Individuation as a process as suggested by Carl Jung starts operating in Lutie the day when she starts working in the Chandlers’ family. Observing how wealthy this white family is, and overhearing Mr. Chandler and his friends’ conversations, Lutie comes to think that as an individual like the Chandlers, she could succeed like them. She has a strong sense of her ability to achieve success. Likewise, individuation continues to operate in her, through her constant reference to Benjamin Franklin. Her paralleling of her case with that of the Bostonian self-made man bears witness to her acute perception of herself as an individual like him. On this basis, she concludes “if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she” (64).

In the case of Lutie, individuation helps her fuel her determination to self-making. It also serves her as a basement for her decision to launch herself on her success expedition.

So much like Lutie Johnson in *The Street*, the Joads also fully display American individualism in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In his “Steinbeck Wine of Affirmation”, J. P. Hunter (1982, p. 38) describes and highlights the individualism of the 8-member-family of the Joads:

under the old order in Oklahoma, the Joads were a proud people, individualists who asked nothing from anyone and who were content with their family-size world as long as they had a home surrounded by land which they could caress into fertility. J. P. Hunter, 1982, p. 38

The corollary of the individualism the Joads display is their belief in their own ability to become successful once in California. That is why, after being evicted from their land, they remained stoic in their attitude. They do not take their predicament as a fatality. Instead, they enter into reflection in order to find a way-out.

Individuation starts operating in the Joads the day they were expelled from the land where they used to make a living in a share-cropping system. Armed with only their past experience of farming and having no acquaintance in California, the Joads are confident about their chances to succeed once they arrive in California; a place said to be replete with many job opportunities. That why, they display no hesitation in undertaking the trip to California.

On the whole Petry’s and Steinbeck’s success hunters have a large faith in their chances to succeed in American society. This great faith even results in their over-optimism.

## 2. Over-optimism about success hunters' social uplift

Petry's and Steinbeck's success hunters share in common their over-optimism about their chances to succeed in American society. In *The Street*, Lutie's over-optimism is essentially built around her constant reference to Benjamin Franklin. In fact, Franklin is not any ordinary American citizen. He is a top icon and enjoys a prominent aura and influence in American history. Coming from destitute origin and self-made man *par excellence*, he succeeded to climb up the American social ladder to reach top status in America. Franklin champions the American success ideology through his *Way to wealth*. In this book, he gospels to Americans that opportunity is open to everyone in America and through hard work, anyone can succeed in American society. He also teaches the virtues one must implement in order to become successful. In other words, as the title of his book suggests, he shows Americans the way to wealth.

Lutie's holding Benjamin Franklin as a paragon, a model to copy in her quest for success really translates her great enthusiasm about her chances to succeed. Indeed, her paralleling of her case with that of the Bostonian self-made man Benjamin Franklin bears witness to her great conviction that success is also possible for her. From this parallelism, Lutie infers that "if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she" (64). The case of Franklin is a factual element which makes her think that she could succeed like him too. It installs in her mind the solid conviction that success is also possible for her. She takes it as a proof. Hence, her over-optimism about her ability to become successful. That is why, she hastily dismisses any first-hand difference observation between her situation and that of Franklin.

Indeed, in this parallelism, Lutie admits some slight unevennesses that she deems to be of no such relevance. By the

way, she acknowledges some setting differences which revolve around the space and time in which she and Franklin are. She admits she is living in Harlem while Franklin was in Philadelphia. And Franklin paved his way on his own “a pretty long number of years ago” (64). Despite these time and space asymmetries, she “couldn’t get rid of the feeling of self-confidence” (64) in thinking that if Franklin did it, she could too.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, things are quite different. No success hunter holds a model that he wants to copy. Steinbeck’s success hunters’ over-optimism is rather grasped through what they want to do once they are in California, the Promised land, the land said to be replete with unlimited opportunities.

Among the 8-member-family of the Joads, Grampa and his granddaughter Rose of Sharon are the ones who display the most so much over-optimism about their chances to succeed. Though their over-optimism is implicitly portrayed in the narrative, it is rather hidden behind what they plan to do once they reach California.

Being the oldest member of the Joad family and the representative of the ancestral link to the family, Grampa’s over-optimism lies behind what he plans to do in California. Indeed, the old man plans to eat the grapes till its juice runs down on his pants as he hopes California be replete with this type of fruits: “An’, by God, they’s grapes out there, just a-hangin’ over into the road. Know what I’m a-gonna do? I’m gonna pick me a wash tub full a grapes, an’ I’m gonna set in ’em, an’ scrooge aroun’, an’ let the juice rundown my pants.” (126)

This image of his greedy consuming of the grapes really translates some two-fold over-optimism. The first is his optimism about all the sweet words that have been poured on California said to be a heaven. The second denotes his optimism about his chances to accomplish his plan.

Though childish Grampa's project may appear to us, the reader should go beyond this literal interpretation of the image painted in the above quotation. Here, what is behind Grampa's picking a wash tub of grapes and his eating of them till the juice runs down on his pants, is his wish to take advantage as much as possible of the happiness that he thinks awaits him in California. The old man wants to swim in happiness and profit from the alleged Californian elation.

The grapes come to symbolize joy, merriment. And the image of his consuming of those fruits till their juice runs down on his pants, stands for his great enjoying of the happiness of California. It also implies the old man's psychological motivation to undertake the trek to California despite his old age and his physical state. It ignites his appetite, inflames his hope and gives him strength for the journey.

Like Grampa, Rose of Sharon's over-optimism lies in what she intends to do once the family reach California. Specifically, it lies in the comfort and the luxury she intends to live in once in the Promised land. There, Connie, her husband would take a job in a store or factory and later on, would open his own store. Additionally, they would have a little car.

On top of that, being pregnant, Rose of Sharon thinks of having her house being replete with modern commodities such as an electric iron and her baby would have all new stuffs, both would have 'a little place' of theirs that is 'nice' and fit for their baby: "An' we'll live in town an' go to pitchers whenever, an'—well, I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff. Connie says all new stuff—white an'— Well, you seen in the catalogue all the stuff they got for a baby." (165)

The luxurious and comfortable life Rose of Sharon plans to live with her husband Connie translates in the first place her belief, her great hope in her chances to achieve her plan.

On the whole, the success hunters have shown their over-optimism about their chances to succeed in American society. However, the reality of events turns their great hope into disillusion as they never succeed to become successful at the end of the plots. Their great hope turns into disillusion.

### **3. Disenchantment as the result of success hunters' herculean efforts**

Another commonness between Petry's and Steinbeck's success hunters is that they all fail to achieve their wish to succeed. Petry's Lutie Johnson equipped with the American success ideology and taking Benjamin Franklin as a model to copy, has performed tremendous efforts in order to reach her end. This is perceptible through the numerous and eclectic jobs (maid, clerk, singer, ...) she involves in with the intent to provide a better living condition to her boy and to her. Despite this fact, she never succeeds to achieve her aim. Like Lutie Johnson, Steinbeck's success hunters have been involved in several jobs once they arrive in California. However, they have not been able to accomplish their aim of becoming successful. Like Lutie, their odyssey ends in disillusion.

Several rationales account for their general failures to achieve their goal. In *The Street*, Lutie is victim of acute sexism. In fact, as she lands in Harlem, she is preyed by men, both white and black. The least one can say about this fact is that through the narrative, one has the impression that in response to Lutie's beautifulness, nearly all the male characters want to have love affair with her. Junto, the bar owner; Mr. Boots Smith, the band boss; Jones (the Super), the janitor of the building where Lutie lives; all these men, be it white or black ask Lutie to have love affair with them some time in the story.

Beyond their alleged love they presume for the young colored woman, one has the feeling that she becomes a sexual object in their eyes. Alexis Boucher underlines this fact in his article entitled: “Race and Feminism: The Evolution of Black Feminist Resistance”. He (2008, p. 15) writes:

Although Junto has plans to make Lutie his sexual companion, Boots feels that he can have Lutie anyway. He does not see Lutie as a woman, or even a person due to his belief that women are inferior to men. A. Boucher, 2008, p. 15

Those men use their social stations to request of Lutie some sexual favours. They see in Bub’s mother, an object of their sexual fantasy. Their view, before everything and undoubtedly, reduces Lutie into a simple sexual object. Much more than that, they give over-importance to Lutie’s body than to the professional competencies she displays. And this latter fact is antithetic to any social uplift.

The next rationale accounting for Lutie’s failure is racism. Being a black woman, Lutie lives in an environment full of racism. Instances where Lutie confronts racial hatred can be found in the story of her son Bub’s polishing shoes in the street. When Lutie discovers her son polishing shoes in the street, she gets furious. She gives lots of pieces of advice to him. Among the reasons for her fury, she tells him that she does not want to see him doing this task because white folks believe that this kind of jobs and other petty jobs are fit only to black folks: “white people seem to think that’s the only kind of work they’re fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least” (70).

Another instance is when working as a maid in the Chandlers’ family. The chandlers’ friends used to come to visit Lutie’s employers. Lutie assumes they do not appreciate her as “whenever she entered a room where they were, they stared at

her with a queer, speculative look” (40). Lutie claims that this fact is linked to her skin color as one day she overheard them pairing black girls like her with prostitutes: “ ‘Sure, she is a wonderful cook. But I wouldn’t have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know they’re always making passes at men. Especially, white men’ ” (40-41). Such an environment full of racial prejudices is not congenial to any social uplift.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Great Depression and capitalism are mainly responsible for the Joads’ failure to achieve their ambition. Set against the historical time period from 1929 to 1939 in California, *The Grapes of Wrath* plot takes place in an era known to America as the Great Depression. More specifically, Steinbeck (W. French, 1953, pp. 33-34) sets the Joads family in “the whole tragic history of American agriculture, dating from the earliest misuse of the soil...[also] land speculation, recurrent depression and droughts...”

In singling out the rationales behind the Joads’ failure to achieve success in California, one should not overlook the social context in which their story takes place. In effect, the social givens in the narrative are not congenial to any social advance for them. In fact, the social data the success hunters experience are far from being amicable to any social advance. Indeed, the family experience the lack of social equality in California. This social inequality ranges from ‘stereotyping’ up to social exclusion. It is quite true that the founding documents of the American republic have many a time boasted the merit of the country in offering equal chances to everyone regardless of birth or circumstances origin. However, the social realities the Joads meet in California take the counterpoint of everything said before.

Furthermore, when the Joads arrive in California in the context of economic depression, they soon realize that jobs are

scarce and are submitted and regulated by the capitalist law of 'offer and demand'. They confront top crooked and profit-minded capitalists like used car sellers, representatives of bank who take advantage of success hunters by giving them menial jobs. Rarely available jobs are farm works and are not well paid as there are many applicants for them. Thus, breaking down all hope for upward mobility.

Like Lutie Johnson, Steinbeck's success hunters also end in total despair as they are not able to achieve their wish to succeed in American society.

## Conclusion

Petry and Steinbeck have sketched forth their success hunters in their quest for success in American society. From this, it emerges that those success hunters' faith in their chances to climb up the social ladder is cemented by their credo in the American myth of success. My analysis notes down that this large faith has even resulted in their over-optimism about their chances for a social uplift. Despite the herculean efforts performed by Petry's and Steinbeck's success hunters, they never achieved their will to succeed. The social data of their societies made up with sexism, racism for Lutie Johnson and social inequality and crooked capitalist practices amidst economic recession era for the Joads; make them fail in their attempt to become successful. Hence, their disenchantment.

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